The Mystery of the Summer House

By Horace Hutchinson

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I, on the contrary, had chosen the chair furthest removed from it, and even that chair I had edged back to the wall, in an almost involuntary movement which took me as far from the dead body as possible.

So I sat there, and watched my uncle, who scarcely, as it seemed to me, took his eyes for a moment from the beautiful dead face. He hardly stirred a muscle, and the silence was so extreme that once, when he got up from his chair and the wicker, relieved of his weight, gave out its creakings, I almost jumped at the startling change.

I watched, curious to know what he was about to do. He had been sitting to the right of the body. He moved, stepping with great care, across to the other side of it. Then he stooped down and lifted the left hand, which lay, palm upward, on the foor. I thought that he was going to lift it to his lips, but instead, when he had raised it but a very little, he put it down again quietly and reverently.

God knows what was in his mind as he did the action. I doubted much whether he knew himself, and of a surety I did not. But after he had done this he went back and sat in the same chair again, almost precisely in the same attitude as before, gazing down into the face that he had loved. He had loved her—no human be-

ing who had ever seen them together for two moments could well have a doubt of that. For my own part, I may admit at one. that I did not love her. I never had. Bitterly as I might grieve for the cruel death that had taken one who seemed so peculiarly full of life and of the enjoyment of life, I could not disguise from myself that the thought had come into my mind time and again during the last year or two that it would have been better with my uncle had he never met her, that it would be far better for him even now could some kind fate remove her.

Remove her Fate had, but one hardly could call it kind, as the white moonlight or the yellow lantern ray fell on the patch of crimson. I speak without any personal knowledge of such places, but from all one hears of society in hill sta-

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tions in India, Simla is not the spot of all others to which a wise man who was not very young would go to choose for himself quite a young wife.

Very surely it was with no such intent in mind that my Uncle Ralph had gone there. It had just so happened that, returning from a shooting trip in Cashmere, Simla lay in his way, so, almost as a thing of course, he had paid it a visit.

There happened to Ralph Carlton what does now and again befall a man who has lived nearly forty years without any serious feminine influence coming into his life. It absorbed him. It took complete possession of him. That was the account of it which we heard at length from acquaintances who were at Simla at the time, but we did not hear it until the marriage was an accomplished fact.

Of course there was no obvious reason why their wedding should be delayed-possibly there were many reasons why, once it was determined on, it was better that it should be hastened. Uncle Ralph may very well have persuaded himself that his duty to the estate demanded his return to England-he as much as said later that this was his determining motive. But it was more likely than not that his desperate infatuation was by far the strongest motive, although he may possibly not have realized it. And it was not in the least likely that the girl's people would put any obstacles or delay in the way of her wedding a man of Uncle Ralph's position and quite sufficient for-

It was a far better marriage than there was the least reason to expect that the daughter of an Indian civil servant would make. It appeared, moreover, that Enid Wentworth had enjoyed her full share of the adventures that were likely to befall a very beautiful and pleasure-loving girl in a society of that kind. Some of the gossips went so far as to hint that her people were only too glad to get her safely married.

At all events, the first news that received of the step which Uncle Ralph contemplated came in a cablegram informing me of his engagement, and before I had time to get his letter, full of more than boyish enthusiasm over the transcendent beauty and bewitching qualities of his betrothed, the knot had been tied as irrevocably as church and law could fasten it.

I do not mean to pretend that the news did not come to me as something like a blow: I was, I hope, delighted that my dear Uncle Ralph, whom I loved almost as second father, had found such happiness as his letter expressed, but I had certain misgivings on account of the haste in which all had been done, as well as of the considerable difference in age between him and his bride. And I had to face the fact that it was likely to make an entire change in my own plans. Uncle Ralph had said in his letter that Enid joined him in the hope that I should still live with them at Scotney and keep my place as his "managing director"so he styled me but until their arrival in England I never supposed for a moment that I was likely to do so. However, when they did arrive, terms were struck between us on the basis which I have described, and I, stayed on.

I have to confess that when first I saw my new young aunt I fell completely under her fascination. It was no wonder that Uncle Ralph

had yielded to it. She was lovely, really quite faultlessly lovely, in a fair, mignonne fashion.

All the little features were perfectly shaped, the nose just sufficiently aquiline to give character and almost dignity to the face. Her complexion, in spite of the Indian sun, was like ivory, with the most delicate flush of warm blood and abounding health-giving life to it, and neither cold nor heat ever seemed to affect it at all. Her eyes were large, blue and expressive, and her hair of the color of ripe corn. But above and beyond all these positive beauties I think it was the wonderful daintiness of her ensemble that chiefly took me captive.

She dressed beautifully and in perfect taste, and her slight figure showed off her frocks to the utmost advantage. But the pearl-like delicacy, the extraordinary cleanness, as if not a speck of dirt or dust could be tolerated or could possibly rest on her, is not describable.

So she was introduced, this beautiful fairy-like creature, into our solid and perhaps rather sombre English home, and at first I, watching them, loved to see the way in which Uncle Ralph's eye followed her about the room as she came and went, and to note his loverly ways with her. It struck me, even from the start, that there was a carelessness in her manner of response to such little caressing acts of his as I was allowed to see which did not suggest a return of equal devotion. It hurt me.

I was most thankful to be able to believe that Uncle Ralph did not notice any lack of fervency on her part. He was always more than satisfied with her, always disposed to sing her praise and commend her actions, and often I was touched by the way in which he would glance from her to me, when she arranged a flower prettily or did any trivial act with her own peculiar grace, or when she made any particularly daring speech or quip, for she had acquired in India a freedom of man-like language quite strange to us at Scotney, and would smile, as if taking me into his confidence and saying, "Was there ever anything so beautiful and so perfect in the world be-

This is what his look and its accompanying smile would ask. And at the first I was able to smile back at him, with willing and admiring assent, but by degrees, as I learnt to know her better, and began to learn, particularly, how very little, in that shallow nature, there was to know, I found myself often at a loss how to answer. or even to bear, that look, and often and often I. would turn my eyes aside or pretend absorption in work of in a book, when I knew that it would be

There were moments when I came near to despising poor Uncle Ralph for his blindness in not seeing a little more of what the soul, if she had one, of this most exquisite piece of human porcelain was composed. But principally it was a most profound pity that I felt for him, mingled with a wonder whether he really were quite so blind as he seemed, or whether he wilfully declined to see what was

Just a trace of a look of doubt, of distress, of puzzlement, came, as it seemed to me, now and again, into those adoring, dog-like eyes of his, following his wife as she moved-just a little questioning in them, taking the place of the old

glad confidence, as he turned them from her to me. Under the consulship of my

Aunt Enid, Uncle Ralph was a good deal more away from Scotney than in the old days, and a good deal more away than he cared to be. He was essentially a man of the country, and of the natural life; she, essentially a woman of cities and of the artificial. She took him often to London, which he detested, and to a mode of London life which he loathed with a special detestation. She took him to Ciro's, where he bored himself nearly to death while she pirouetted, in the latest fox-trots and cake-walks with all and sundry white-waistcoated young men. She took him to revues innumerable, to musical comedies and to Savoy suppers after them.

And then, of course, it was only natural and seemly that the young men with whom she had danced at Ciro's and had supped at the Savoy should be asked to stay at Scotney. They were asked, and they came, and they talked a language together of which Uncle Ralph could scarcely understand the elements.

Aunt Enid, of their own generation and of quicker aptitudes, assimilated it wonderfully. She was one of their lot, and Uncle Ralph was not one of them and was, and

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must have felt himself, out of it. They laughed and talked together, not always about too seemly subjects, all through dinner, and Uncle Raiph, at the head of his own table, would sit almost silent, still watching her at times with the spaniel eyes, but sometimes again with the puzzled look, and with a glance at me as if tacitly asking my views about it all.

I had my own views, very clearly

formed, but I did not think it would do either of us, nor the general situation of things, any good were I to impart it to him.

(To Be Com nued Next Sunday.)





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